

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUL #2492/01 2060013
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 250013Z JUL 06
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9287
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0991
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1066
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J2 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC//OSD/ISA/EAP//
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002492

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/18/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: 2007 ROK POSSIBLE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES PROFILED

REF: A. SEOUL 2432
[1](#)B. SEOUL 2190

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: As the presidential election season nears (See Reftel A), there are many faces, most old, some new, that are busy jockeying for position. Will the old guard come out ahead and succeed in replacing President Roh next year with a conservative leader such as Park Geun-hye? Or does Kim Dae-jung have one more king-making miracle up his sleeve? Can someone in the Uri Party emerge with national appeal? This cable outlines the leading candidates for president and tells where they stand right now. END SUMMARY.

GNP

[1](#)2. (SBU) Park Geun-Hye: Park has been the face of the Grand National Party (GNP) for the past two years and is the current leading presidential hopeful. Under Park, the party's approval rating last month reached its highest point at 45 percent. According to the latest poll numbers published on July 19 in the independent JoongAng Ilbo, Park claims 29 percent nationwide support. She is ahead of her closest contender Goh Kun, by nearly 10 percentage points. The turning point for her popularity was in May when a man wielding a box cutter attacked her and slashed her right cheek. The incident led to an outpouring of sympathy among her supporters and a boost to her poll numbers. After recovery, she immediately resumed her public activities, showing the public her determination and dedication. The GNP rode her coattails to a sweeping victory in the May 31 local elections. Particularly helped by Park was Park Seoung-ho, the current Daejeon City mayor. Somewhat surprisingly, support for Park is quite strong among younger Koreans; 32.3 percent of people between the ages 19-29 responded that they support her for president. While her popularity soared to nearly 44 percent in the immediate aftermath of the attack, it has declined and leveled out.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Lee Myung-bak: Former Seoul Mayor Lee is currently in third place after Park Geun-hye and Goh Kun with 18.2 percent support for his candidacy. Credited with creating a newer and cleaner Seoul, including a makeover of the Cheonggyecheon Stream that runs through the central part of the city, Lee remains Park's top rival within the GNP. Lee Jae-oh, the runner up at the GNP national convention, is Lee Myung-bak's right-hand man. Lee Myung-bak is also known

for his strong pro-American stance. Last March, Lee faced some controversy when he was accused of receiving monetary funds from a tennis association to pay for his membership. A former businessman, he is commonly referred to by his nickname "Bulldozer," a moniker he received because of his ability to get things done. Lee prides himself as a "can-do" person on economic issues as well.

14. (SBU) Sohn Hak-kyu: Sohn, the former Governor of Gyeonggi Province, is far behind with only 1.4 percent support. During Sohn's four year term, Gyeonggi Province attracted about \$13.6 billion in foreign direct investment and created some 560,000 jobs. Sohn is credited with establishing The English Village, which opened in Ansan in 2004, a place where Koreans can experience American language and culture. The motivation behind the English Village is Sohn's belief that learning English is the key to creating a more globally competitive society. Yet, he has received considerably less media attention than Seoul Mayor Lee Myoung-bak for his efforts. Although there was speculation that he might join with other centrist politicians or form a new party, Sohn has insisted that he intends to stay in the GNP and to reform it. Sohn identifies himself as a "reformative conservative." He is currently three weeks in to a 100-day tour of Korea, where he hopes to learn what the Korean people want in a leader (Reftel B).

15. (SBU) Won Hee-ryong: Won is a moderate conservative who has been in an on and off political feud with Park Geun-hye for years. In 2004, Won was runner-up behind Park in the party convention to elect party chairman. Yet his bitter criticism of Park for her intolerance of opposition left him alienated within the party. In an interview, Won asserted: "When someone does not fit into her intolerant ideology for national identity, she considers him a communist." Last year, Won, Oh Se-Hoon and other junior GNP lawmakers created an intra-party reformist group called the Future Alliance. Won has little chance of securing a GNP presidential nomination, except perhaps name recognition for another run in the future.

URI PARTY

16. (SBU) Chung Dong-young: Chung, the former chairman of the Uri Party, Unification Minister and Chair of the National Security Council, is still considered a strong presidential candidate despite his exit from politics after the colossal defeat suffered in the May 31 regional elections by the Uri Party. He is currently at the Free University of Berlin as a visiting researcher. He said he hopes to gain perspective as he steps away from politics. He is expected to vie for the Uri nomination with Kim Geun-tae, who succeeded him as Uri Party chairman. He began his career as a journalist for Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation. From February till June 2006, he served as Chairman of the Uri Party. As Chairman, Chung proposed to form a coalition with the Democratic Party and this created large rifts in the party and contributed to the loss by the Uri Party. He has only 4.1 percent popular support for his candidacy at this point and observers believe he does not have a strong chance to gain the Uri Party nomination.

17. (SBU) Kim Geun-tae, Chairman of the Uri Party and former Minister of Health and Welfare has a storied background in the pro-democracy movement. He was imprisoned for anti-government activities in 1985. He joined the National Assembly in 1996. In 2002, he ran unsuccessfully for the presidential nomination for the New Millennium Democratic Party, losing to President Roh Moo-hyun. In 2003, he was elected as the floor leader of the Uri Party. As a progressive reformist, more moderate party members have criticized him. Considering his weak 2.1 percent public support in presidential polls, many think he may take a role as a 'kingmaker' and not seek the nomination.

18. (SBU) Since the two main Uri Party candidates have less

than 5 percent national support, pundits are spending a lot of time coming up with names that could head the Uri ballot next year. Most frequently mentioned are former Prime Minister Goh Kun and Chung Un-chan whose term as president of Seoul National University ended earlier this month.

¶9. (SBU) Former Prime Minister Goh Kun enjoys wide public support (19.4 percent) and both the Uri Party and Democratic Party (DP) have expressed their interest in having Goh as their candidate. The former PM and Seoul Mayor has a broad network of support in and out of politics. In 1975, Goh served as governor of Jeonllabuk-do and in 1981 he was appointed as Minister of Transportation and then as Minister of Agriculture and Forestry (1981-85). In 1985 he joined the Democratic Justice Party and in 1987 he became Minister of Home Affairs. He served as Prime Minister in 1997 as well as ¶2003. Many see Goh as a safe choice who has proved his administrative skills over a long career. However, critics claim he has not shown dynamism or leadership that would be needed to be an effective president.

¶10. (SBU) Former Seoul National University President Chung Un-chan reaffirmed his determination not to go into politics at his farewell ceremony at Seoul National University and said he would return to teaching as an economics professor beginning in the fall. Still, his name frequents political columns, which he apparently enjoys.

¶11. (SBU) Kang Keum-sil, who served as Korea's first woman minister of justice (2003-4), joined Uri on April to run for mayor of Seoul but she was defeated by GNP's candidate Oh Se-hoon. She blamed her party leadership and has since attempted to distance herself from the party. Kang studied law at Seoul National University and passed the bar in 1981. In 1985, Kang was appointed as a judge for Seoul High Court. She has broad appeal with women voters but her poor showing in the Seoul mayoral election likely doomed her chances for a presidential run.

VERSHBOW